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NOTES FOR SPEECH
AT DINNER
OCTOBER 11 1855
BY
W. M. THACKERAY
ON THE EVE OF HIS
DEPARTURE FOR
AMERICA

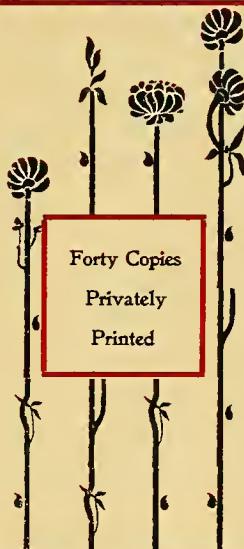


Letter to Wm. C. Macready



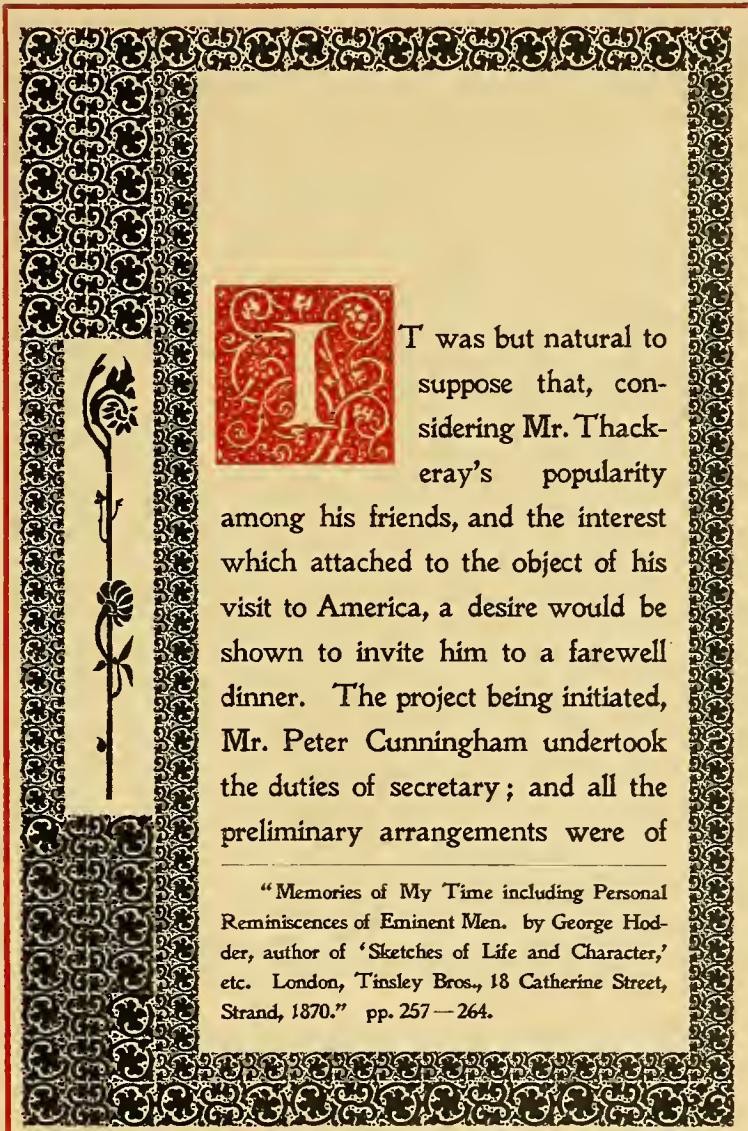
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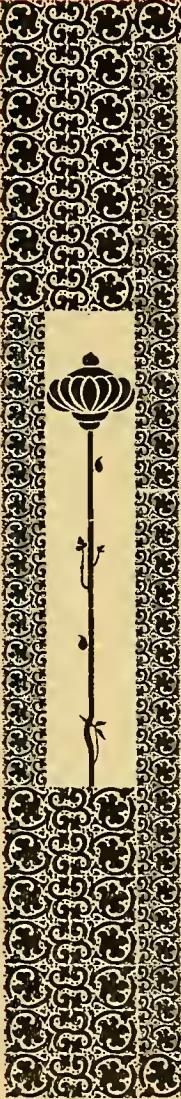
T was but natural to suppose that, considering Mr. Thackeray's popularity among his friends, and the interest which attached to the object of his visit to America, a desire would be shown to invite him to a farewell dinner. The project being initiated, Mr. Peter Cunningham undertook the duties of secretary; and all the preliminary arrangements were of

"Memories of My Time including Personal Reminiscences of Eminent Men. by George Hodder, author of 'Sketches of Life and Character,' etc. London, Tinsley Bros., 18 Catherine Street, Strand, 1870." pp. 257—264.



the most satisfactory kind, care being taken that the party should be entirely private, and that it should consist exclusively of Mr. Thackeray's intimates.

On the morning of the banquet he was in a state of great nervous anxiety, saying that it was very kind of his friends to give him a dinner, but that he wished it was over, for such things always set him trembling. "Besides," he exclaimed, "I have to make a speech, and what am I to say? Here, take a pen in your hand and sit down; and I'll see if I can hammer out something. It's hammering now; I'm afraid it will be stammering by and by." I did as he requested, and he dictated with much ease and fluency a speech—or rather the heads



of a speech—which he proposed delivering in response to the inevitable toast of his own health.

This was on a morning in the first week of October, 1855, and the dinner took place at the London Tavern in the evening of the same day, the duties of chairman being delegated to Mr. Charles Dickens, who from the very beginning of his public career had always manifested a remarkable aptitude for that responsible office.

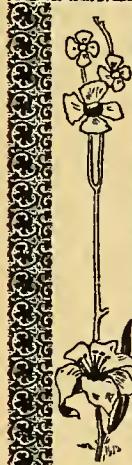
The following account of the affair was afterward published by a gentleman who was present on the occasion:—



HE Thackeray dinner was a triumph. Covers, we are assured, were laid for sixty; and sixty and no more sat down precisely at the minute named to do honor to the great novelist. Sixty very hearty shakes of the hand did Thackeray receive from sixty friends on that occasion; and hearty cheers from sixty vociferous and friendly tongues followed the chairman's — Mr. Charles Dickens — proposal of his health, and of wishes for his speedy and successful return among us. Dickens —



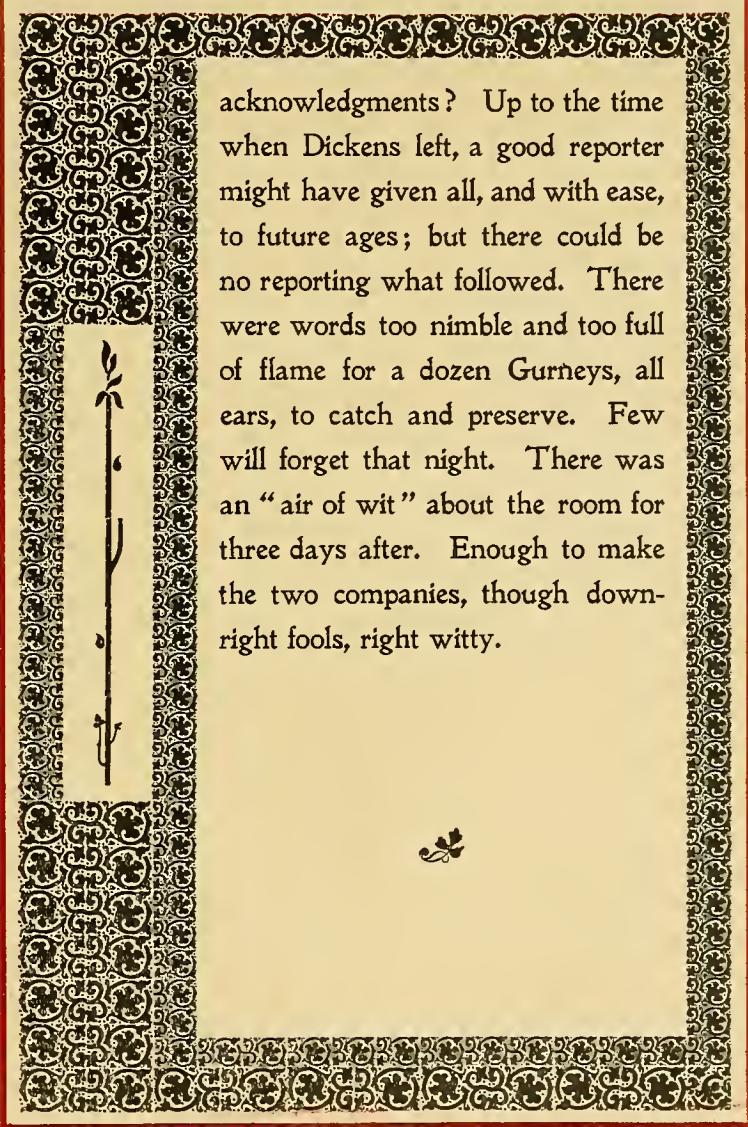
the best after-dinner speaker now alive—was never happier. He spoke as if he was fully conscious that it was a great occasion, and that the absence of even one reporter was a matter of congratulation, affording ample room to unbend. The table was in the shape of a horseshoe, having two vice-chairmen, and this circumstance was wrought up and played with by Dickens in the true Sam Weller and Charles Dickens manner. Thackeray, who is far from what is called a good speaker, outdid himself. There was his usual hesitation; but this hesitation becomes his manner of speaking and his matter, and is never unpleasant to his hearers, though it is, we are assured, most irksome to himself. This speech was full of



pathos and humor and oddity, with bits of prepared parts imperfectly recollected, but most happily made good by the felicities of the passing moment. Like the "Last Minstrel,"

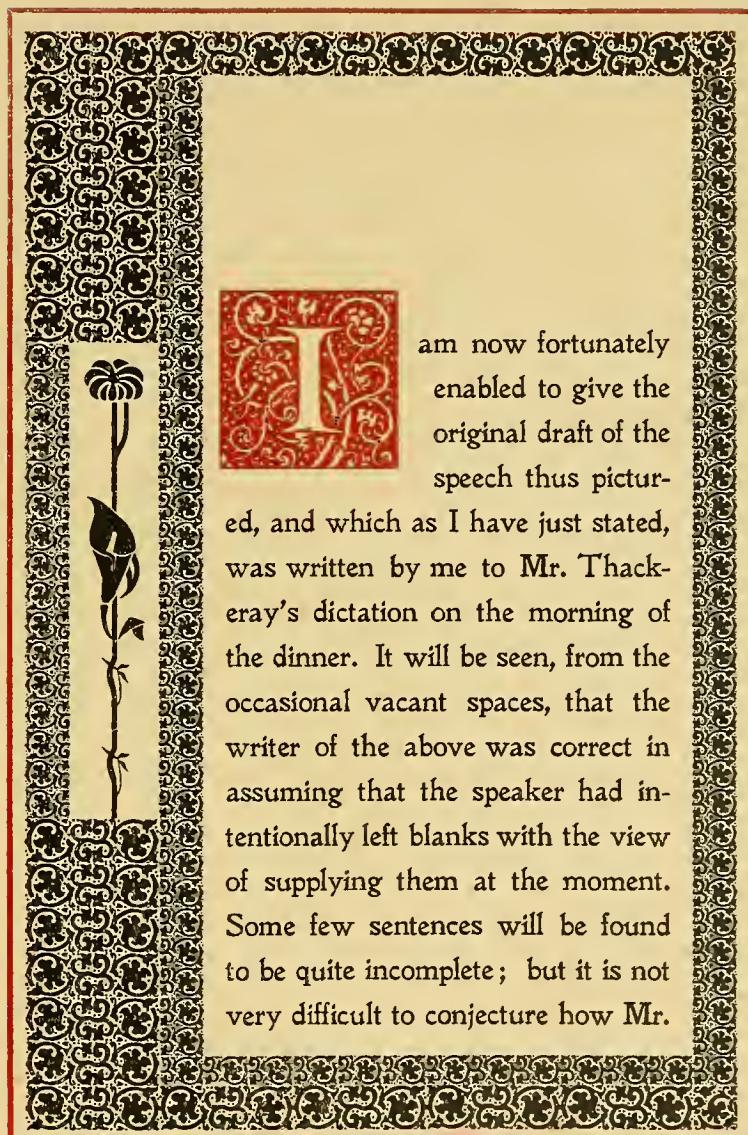
*"Each blank in faithless memory's void
The poet's glowing thought supplied."*

It was a speech to remember for its earnestness of purpose and its undoubted originality. Then the chairman quitted, and many near and at a distance quitted with him. Thackeray was on the move with the chairman, when, inspired by the moment, Jerrold took the chair, and Thackeray remained. Who is to chronicle what now passed?—what passages of wit—what neat and pleasant sarcastic speeches in proposing healths—what varied and pleasant, aye, and at times sarcastic



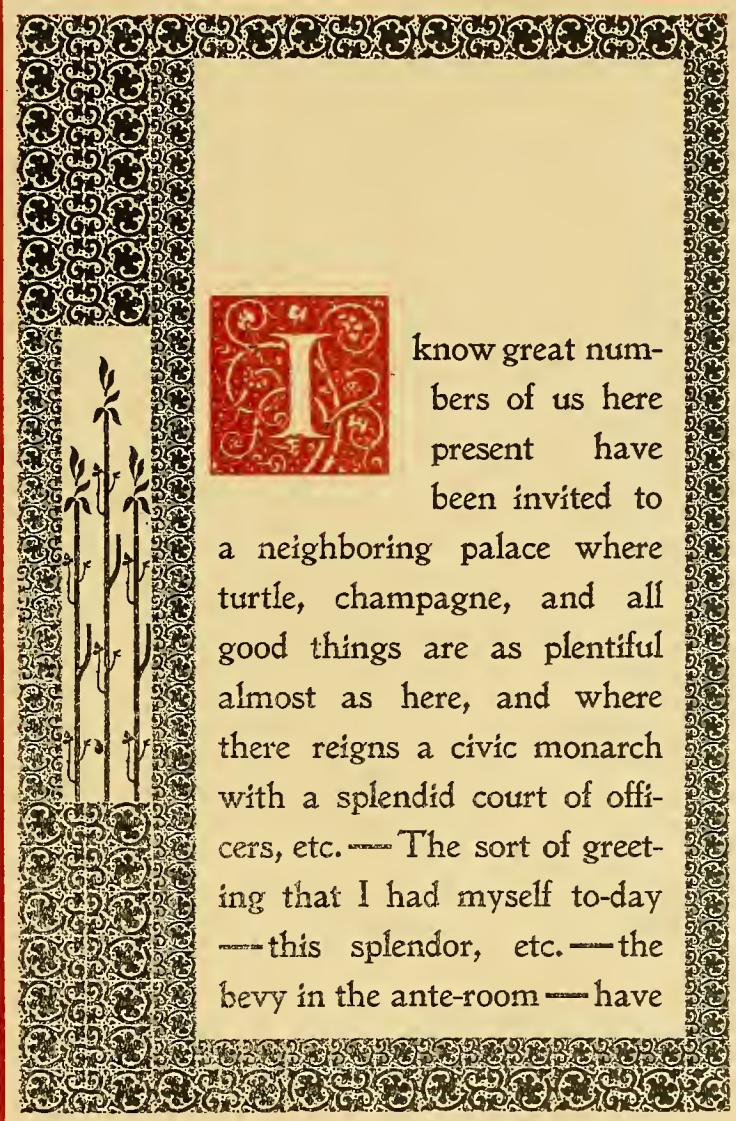
acknowledgments? Up to the time when Dickens left, a good reporter might have given all, and with ease, to future ages; but there could be no reporting what followed. There were words too nimble and too full of flame for a dozen Gurneys, all ears, to catch and preserve. Few will forget that night. There was an "air of wit" about the room for three days after. Enough to make the two companies, though downright fools, right witty.







Thackeray would fill them - up ;
though I believe I am right in say-
ing that the speech as delivered fell
far short of the speech as written.
The latter has never been out of
my possession since it came from
Mr. Thackeray's lips ; for, having
once tested his power, and brought
to light the thoughts which ani-
mated him, he did not care for the
MS., and did not even read it. I
subjoin it, ipsissima verba :—



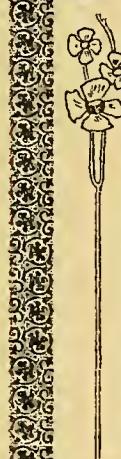


filled my bosom with an elation with which no doubt Sir Francis Graham Moon's throbs.¹ I am surrounded by respectful friends, etc. — and I feel myself like a Lord Mayor. To his lordship's delight and magnificence there is a drawback. In the fountain of his pleasure there surges a bitter. He is thinking about the 9th of November, and I about the 13th of October.²

Some years since, when I was younger and used to frequent jolly assemblies, I wrote a Bacchanalian song, to be

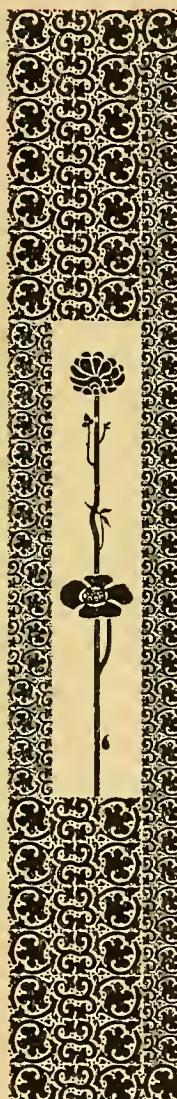
¹ Sir F. G. Moon, Bart., was at that time Lord Mayor of London.

² The day on which he was to start for America.



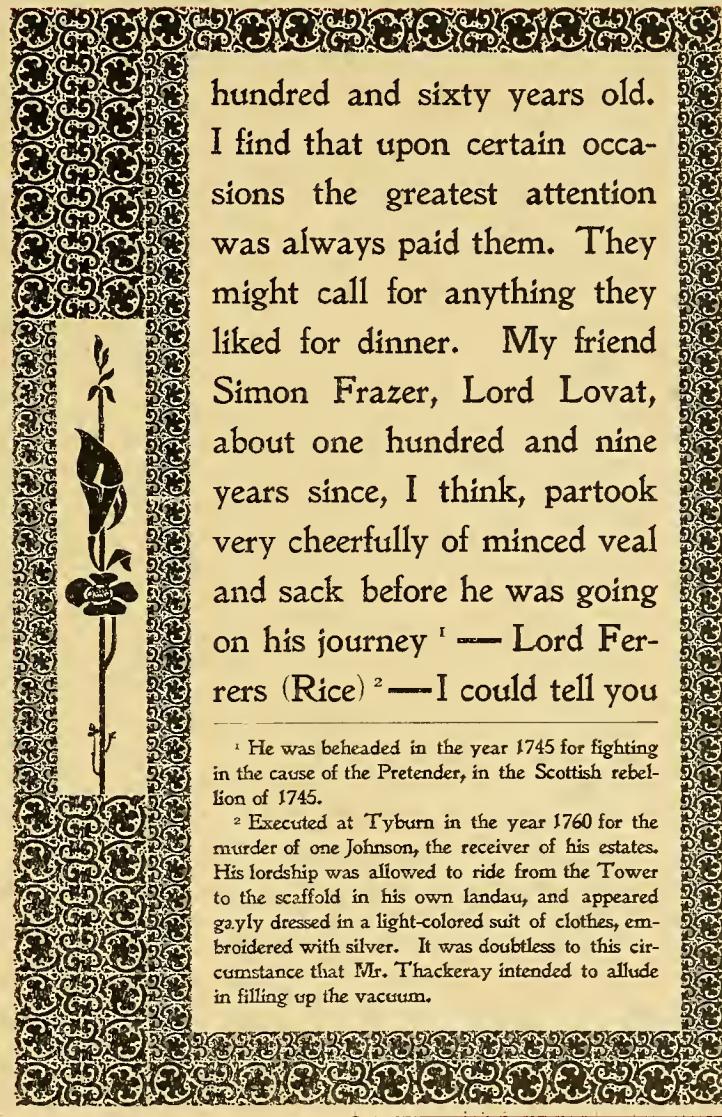
chanted after dinner, etc. — I wish some one would sing that song now to the tune of the "Dead March in Saul," etc. — not for me — I am miserable enough; but for you, who seem in a great deal too good spirits. I tell you I am not — all the drink in Mr. Bathe's¹ cellar won't make me. There may be sherry there five hundred years old — Columbus may have taken it out from Cadiz with him when he went to discover America, and it wo'n't make me jolly, etc. — and yet, entirely unsatisfactory as this

¹ The then proprietor of the London Tavern.



feast is to me, I should like some more. Why can't you give me some more? I don't care about them costing two guineas a head. It is not the turtle I value. Let us go to Simpson's fish ordinary—or to Bertolini's or to John o' Groat's, etc.—I don't want to go away—I cling round the mahogany-tree.

In the course of my profound and extensive reading I have found it is the habit of the English nation to give dinners to the unfortunate. I have been living lately with some worthy singular fellows one hundred and fifty or one



¹ He was beheaded in the year 1745 for fighting in the cause of the Pretender, in the Scottish rebellion of 1745.

² Executed at Tyburn in the year 1760 for the murder of one Johnson, the receiver of his estates. His lordship was allowed to ride from the Tower to the scaffold in his own landau, and appeared gayly dressed in a light-colored suit of clothes, embroidered with silver. It was doubtless to this circumstance that Mr. Thackeray intended to allude in filling up the vacuum.



a dozen jolly stories about feasts of this sort. I remember a particular jolly one at which I was present, and which took place at least nine hundred years ago. My friend Mr. Macready gave it at Fores Castle, North Britain, Covent Garden. That was a magnificent affair indeed. The tables were piled with most splendid fruits — gorgeous dish-covers glittered in endless perspective — Macbeth — Macready, I mean — taking up a huge beaker, shining with enormous gems that must have been worth many hundred millions of money,



filled it out of a gold six-gallon jug, and drank courteously to the general health of the whole table. Why did he put it down? What made him, in the midst of that jolly party, appear so haggard and melancholy? It was because he saw before him the ghost of John Cooper, with chalked face and an immense streak of vermillion painted across his throat! No wonder he was disturbed. In like manner I have before me at this minute the horrid figure of a steward, with a basin perhaps, or a glass of brandy and water, which he will press me to drink, and



which I shall try and swallow,
and which won't make me
any better—I know it won't.

Then there's the dinner,
which we all of us must re-
member in our school-boy
days, and which took place
twice or thrice a year at home,
on the day before Dr. Birch
expected his young friends to
reassemble at his academy,
Rodwell Regis. Don't you
remember how the morning
was spent? How you went
about taking leave of the gar-
den, and the old mare and
foal, and the paddock, and
the pointers in the kennel;
and how your little sister



wistfully kept at your side all day ; and how you went and looked at that confounded trunk which old Martha was packing with the new shirts, and at that heavy cake packed up in the play-box ; and how kind "the governor" was all day ; and how at dinner he said, "Jack—or Tom—pass the bottle" in a very cheery voice ; and how your mother had got the dishes she knew you liked best ; and how you had the wing instead of the leg, which used to be your ordinary share ; and how that dear, delightful, hot raspberry rolly-polly pudding, good as it

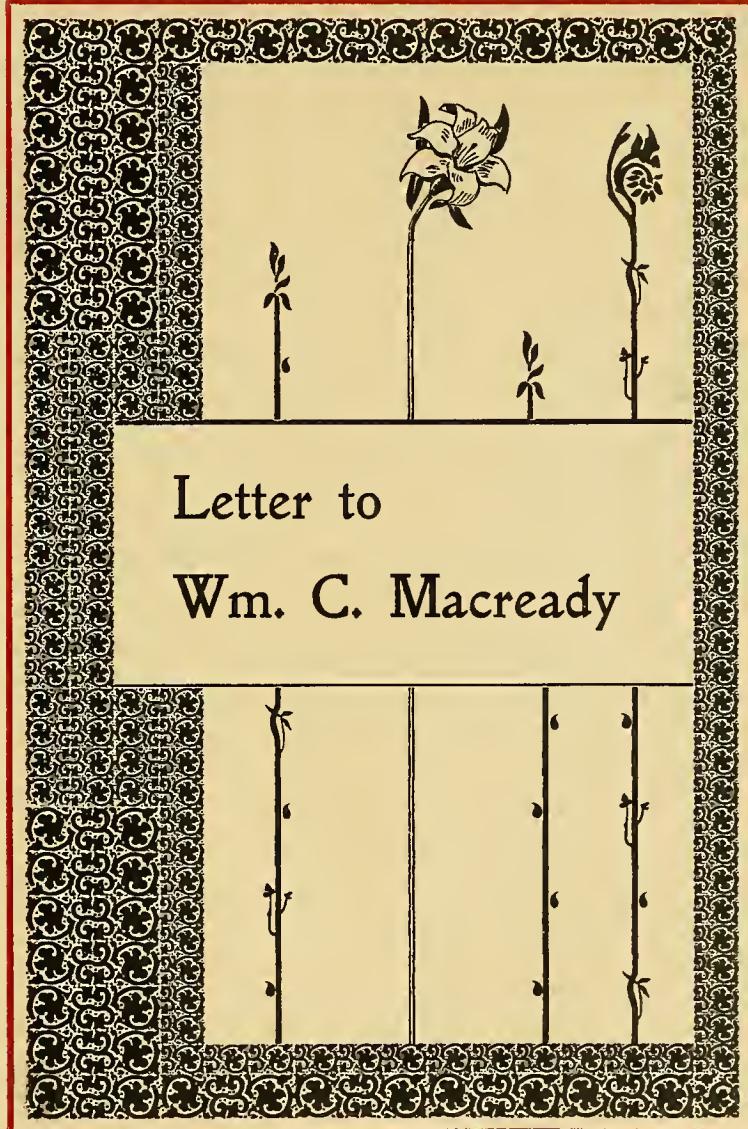


was, and fondly beloved by you, yet somehow had the effect of the notorious school stick-jaw, and choked you and stuck in your throat; and how the gig came; and then, how you heard the whirl of the mail-coach wheels, and the tooting of the guard's horn, as with an odious punctuality the mail and the four horses came galloping over the hill.
— Shake hands, good-by! God bless everybody! Don't cry, sister.— Away we go! and to-morrow we begin with Dr. Birch, and six months at Rodwell Regis!

But after six months came
the holidays again ! ¹ etc., etc.,
etc.

¹ Mr. Thackeray was to be absent from England
for that space of time.





Letter to
Wm. C. Macready

Clarendon Hotel, New York.

Nov. 20.

My dear Macready.

I have been wanting to write you a line ever since I have been here, and waiting for a day's quiet when I could have leisure to send a letter big enough to travel 3000 miles — but there never is a day's quiet here. It is day after day skurry & turmoil friends calling strangers calling newspaper articles bawling out abuse or telling absurd personalities

— you know the life well enough, and have undergone the persecution in your time. The dollars hardly compensate for it; nor the extraordinary kindness and friendliness of the real friends on whom one lights. Several of your's are here and in Boston I know I shall meet many more. Did Forster tell you I had met Hall and C King and good old Dr Francis who all asked with such sincere regard after you and seemed so happy to hear you looked well? I told them that I had seen you the last day I was in London and how very kind it was of you to



come all the way from Sher-
borne to give me a parting
shake of the hand. My dear
fellow, it is about that horrible
nightmare of a dinner I want
to speak to you. You must
know I intended to say some-
thing funny about Macbeth &
Banquo ; and then to finish
off with the prettiest compli-
ment and give some notion of
the kindness I was feeling —
I blundered in the joke left out
the kindness & compliment —
made an awful fiasco. If I lose
my head when I try speech-
making, all is up with me. I
say what I dont mean, what I
dont know afterwards the Lord



forgive me—and you must if I said aught (I dont know for certain that I did or didn't) w^h was unpleasing I am savage sometimes when my heart is at it's very tenderest, and I want to tell you now—and no other words are authentic and if I said 'em I deny 'em—that I felt pleased & touch'd by your kindness and apologize hereby for my own blunder and cordially shake you by the hand.

As far as money goes I am doing great things here & the dollars are rolling in. I shall make all but 1000£ in 5 weeks—though not of course



to continue at this rate. At first the papers didn't like the lectures: but they are better pleased with the second reading, & the public likewise, who begin to find that what seems very easy is not done in a hurry. What the people like is sentiment, and I could not give them any of this article except about old George III whom they received very tenderly. I polished him off with an image taken from the death scene of an old king whom you have heard of—depicted w

—Here at the 'w' came in a visitor; then another visi-



tor ; then good old Dr Francis who came to doctor me ; and now lo the post hour has come and I cant finish that interesting story about George III, & the old king you used to know in times when you wore crowns, & of whom, being dead, it was said Vex not his ghost o let him pass he hates him who would upon the rack of this tough world stretch him out longer. What a nice kind little bit this is of the old man, w^h he writes you ! Good bye my dear Macready and believe me sincerely

Yours always

W M THACKERAY

Dear Mr. McCready. I am permitted by Mr. Thackeray to add a line. I tender to you my sincerest regards and think of you often indeed. I shall shortly address you at some length. I am still in great affliction.

Ever truly

JOHN W FRANCIS.



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